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Convenience stores and discretionary food consumption among young Tokyo consumers.

Abstract

Purpose: This paper considers the question of young consumer's discretionary consumption in Japan where the ready access to convenience stores, or 'konbini', presents a unique retail landscape. It looks at how young Japanese consumers use this store format as part in their discretionary food consumption.

Design/Methodology/Approach: this is an exploratory study that draws on primary qualitative data based on in-store observations, accompanied shopping and a survey with young Japanese consumers. This approach provides an insight into the convenience store food offering and young consumer's everyday food practices and experience of using these retail stores.

Findings: the data reveals a relatively limited range of purchases on each store visit with some variation across time of the day and differences between individual and groups of young consumers. Visits before and after school remain the most popular and young consumers make around 2-4 visits per week to a convenience store. It finds young consumers actively engaged in independent purchasing decisions in this retail format.

Research limitations: this is an exploratory study with a geographically constrained sample conducted in several areas in and around Tokyo, Japan. It is a convenience sample recruited using student contacts and snowballing techniques.

Practical implications: Convenience stores represent an important 'shopping habitat' for young consumers to engage in discretionary food shopping. While these convenience store purchases are not always unhealthy the promotion and pricing strategies used by retailers can have an influence on the final selection of products and convenience stores provide a unique opportunity to cultivate more healthful behaviour among young consumers.

Originality/Value: this offers a unique insight into the relationship between young consumer's discretionary food choice and local retail provision in the convenience sector. It adds to the debate on the role of food environment on food choice and the extent to which young Japanese consumers are socialised into particular food practices through their engagement with the convenience retail sector.

Introduction

'The mass media (e.g. Nikkei Rutsu Newspaper 1987a, Yomiuri Newspaper 1988) reported that pupils of junior high School and even primary schools congregated at convenience stores on the way to or from their cram schools. While these pupils generally lived with their parents, they were also attracted to the convenience stores.....The nearest cram school starts from about 4 pm. Soon after coming back from school pupils either have refreshments or stop by at a convenience store, buy something like potato snacks and eat them there with their friends, and then go to the cram school' as mothers of primary school pupils reported in Meguro Ward, Tokyo (Ashi Newspaper 1990). As a result, a nationwide sample survey indicated that 39 percent of the customers of convenience stores were the young, from primary school pupils to university/college students' (Usui, K. Marketing and Consumption in Modern Japan, 2014, p 189).

Usui (2014) notes the rise in convenience stores, or 'konbini', in Japanese retail and the attraction of these stores to young consumers. While the demographic shift towards an aging population means that young consumers no longer represent such a high proportion of convenience store customers (Kodera 2015) this remains a rich environment to explore the food buying and behaviour patterns of the next generation of consumers (McNeal, 2007; Middleman and Melzer, 1984, Marshall et. al 2007). This paper considers the 'konbini' as an important shopping habitat for young Japanese consumers and looks at their consumption practices in light of recent concerns about the obesogenic food environment (Lake et. al. 2011). It begins by looking at the Japanese 'konbini' store before considering the relationship between the food environment, health and discretionary consumption. This is an exploratory piece of research with the aim of investigating one aspect of young Tokyo consumer's food practices. The methodology section outlines the research agenda before presenting findings from qualitative fieldwork drawing on observations, accompanied shopping trips in and around several Tokyo convenience stores and survey data collected from young consumers (university students and school children). The paper offers an insight into young consumer's food shopping experiences and the role of convenience stores in their discretionary consumption practice.

The 'Konbini'

The convenience store, or 'konbini', forms a central part of the food retail sector in Japan and the proliferation of convenience stores is something that strikes one as a visitor to Tokyo. While many parts of the world have 'corner shops' or 'mom and pop' store the Japanese 'konboni' is a model of logistical efficiency and product innovation (Larke and Causton 2005, Ishikawa and Nejo1998). Early forms of convenience store were part of

voluntary chains led by wholesalers and handled perishable foods such as vegetables, fruit, meat and fish. In the early 1970's these traditional Japanese style convenience stores (*nihon-gata*) were replaced by a new type of convenience store, as general super storesⁱ entered the convenience sector. Today the sector is dominated by three main operators - Seven-Eleven Japan, Lawson, and Family Mart. As the majority of convenience store consumers walk rather than drive to the store each store defined its primary trading area as 500m from the store. This 'strategy of dense location' (*shuchu shutten senryaku*) led to the geographical concentration of stores, often from the same company, and a unique Japanese retail feature (Usui, 2014: 187-189). Legislative changes prohibited and restricted the operation of large food stores meaning that there was little competition from the '*supers*'. By 2020, it is predicted that, most urban Japanese will live no more than 200 metres from a convenience store (Eagle, 2015).

There are currently around 56,000 convenience stores across Japan, accounting for 19% of total food sales and a market value of 10.2 trillion yen. The sector is dominated by three companies with Seven-Eleven having around 40% of the market share followed by Lawson and Family Mart both with around 19%. These outlets sell a range of food and non-food products with a growing number of private brand items (Eagle, 2015; Family Mart, 2016; Japan Consuming, 2015; Larke and Causton, 2005; Lawson, 2016; Seven Eleven, 2106; Yamata and Yamade, 2013). Food items include instant ramen, onigiri (rice balls), sandwiches, bread, along with hot foods like fried chicken, nikuman and oden, and microwave meals as well as obento or bento (lunchboxes), snacks and sweets (Kodera, 2015; Usui, 2014). Stores stock around 2-3000 items depending in the size of the store and daily food or ready to eat items (bento, noodles, sandwiches, delicatessens, desserts etc.) account for around 30% of products, with processed food (beverages, snacks, instant noodles, confectionary etc.) for a further 25% of sales. While categories differ between the main operators fast food (coffee, oden, fried foods etc.) represents around 5% of sales. Seven-Eleven offer around 2800 products and replace some 70% of products each year introducing 100 new products in stores each week to appeal to the Japanese desire for new and innovative products. In 2015 90 daily food products sold over 1 billion Yen, as did 12 confectionary and 14 processed products (Seven-Eleven 2016). Early morning breakfast items will be replaced by lunchtime foods and then evening meals as the merchandising changes to accommodate the different times of the day. This allows small stores (around 128 square metres) to stock a wide range of products supported by an efficient and effective food distribution system (Larke and Causton, 2005).

Convenience store operators strive to renew and refresh their product offering and currently Seven-Eleven are committed to developing their product offering of chilled products and

pastries while Aeon have been expanding their range of fresh products with My Basket stores (Seven-Eleven Corporate Profile Report, 2014; Retail Week, 2011). There are a range of other food outlets including supermarkets, general stores, department stores and fast food outlets but the dense location strategy means convenience stores are very accessible. Despite the growing proportion of older consumers, more women employed outside the home and the shift towards smaller households young consumers remain an important segment for convenience stores; although the falling birth rate means that this segment will likely represent a smaller proportion of convenience store customers than in the past (Kadera, 2015). The small store format will continue to play an important role in the food sector as new formats develop (Japan Consuming 2016)

Conceptual Foundation

The food shopping environment and healthy eating.

The food environment has a significant impact on food choice not least in relation to diet (Gallo et. al., 2014; Lake et. al., 2001; Ruff et. al., 2015). Convenience stores provide a greater assortment of less-healthy foods such as sugar sweetened beverages, sweets, salty snacks, chips, cookies and pastries (Sharkey et. al., 2012; Sharkey et. al., 2013) although the relative shelf space ration devoted to healthy versus unhealthy items is variable across store formats (Farley et. al. 2009). While the relationship between food availability and health is not straightforward (Lee, 2012; Sheil et. al., 2012, Mukarami 2009, 2010) there is some evidence that household nutrient intake is less healthy when children can purchase food on their own from a convenience store. This frequent purchase of less healthy (energy dense) snack foods and sugar-sweetened beverages has been linked to multiple trips to conveniently located stores. These are often impulse purchases subjected to in store decisions influenced by product assortment, placement, promotion and price (Sharkey et. al. 2012). A high proportion of young people visit food outlets at school lunchtime (75-90%) visiting corner shops and newsagents (45%), supermarkets (23%) and fast food outlets (26%) (Wills et. al. 2015). Choosing to go to the same places as their friends and proximity to school were the most important factors in choosing where to purchase food and drink at lunchtime, although young people are prepared to travel further from school to access what they want. Prices, discounts, variety, service (although not meal deals) were other important considerations (Wills et. al., 2015).

The ubiquity of the convenience store, usually within walking distance, provides ample opportunity for young consumers to purchase these less healthy foods (Grigsby-Toussaint 2011) and with a high proportion of US adolescents visiting a convenience store at least once a week there are concerns over the health implications in this 'obesogenic' food

environment' (Sanders-Jackson et. al. 2015). As daily work and school routines change the snack and food industry has responded with a number of convenient food options and eating outside the home is becoming more widespread, particularly across parts of Asia (Veeck, 2014). As Usui (2014) notes in Japan young consumers represent an important segment of convenience store shoppers but what is the appeal of the convenience store?

Limited opportunities for discretionary consumption

Retail outlets form an important part of consumer socialisation as young consumers learn to purchase through the act of shopping (Moschis and Moore 1979; Ward et.al, 1977) and are more actively engaged in family food shopping and decisions around food choice, especially for products they are interested in (Epp and Price, 2008; Gram, 2015; Marshall, 2014; Nash and Basini, 2012; Nooregaard, 2007; O'Docherty et.al., 2006). Moreover, young consumers are increasingly knowledgeable about product categories and retail layout, often assisting with the food shopping, negotiating the store aisles (Gram, 2015; Haselhoff et. al., 2014; Wilson and Wood, 2004) and engaging with products in the store (Aitken, 1978). Even very young children display an understanding of the grocery 'script' and mimic adult behaviour (Drenten et. al., 2008). Most of these trips to the retail store involve at least one parent and despite children's influence in store their behaviour is often sanctioned by parents (Marshall 2014, Ironico, 2012; Barrey et. al., 2010). We know much less about 'discretionary consumption' i.e. when young consumers are 'free' to buy, and eat, what they want independently of their parents (Marshall et. al., 2007) or about their behaviour in store when not accompanied by adults.

Small stores are seen as a relatively safe environment to learn about shopping – making choices and paying for goods – particularly when shopkeepers are there to assist and provide an access point to the world of food (Everts and Jackson 2009). These consumption occasions, outside the home and away from parents, represent an important part of young consumers food consumption experience. While much of the debate around young consumer's food choice has centred on advertising and marketing we know much less about how they engage with the food retail environment (Elliot, 2012, Sanders-Jackson et. al 2015). Store preferences may reflect prices, product variety and availability, store layout, staff interaction and location to home or school (Filipovic and Djordjevic, 2010; Williams and Burns, 2001). Physical stores appeal to young consumers because of the immediacy of the experience, the opportunity to browse, to physically handle products and the greater autonomy compared to offline shopping (Boulay et. al., 2014). When shopping unaccompanied young consumers are faced with a different set of decisions about where to

shop and what to eat. This leads to the question of how they experience this food retail environment when the opportunity for 'discretionary consumption' arises.

Method

The density of convenience stores in Tokyo combined with a relatively safe shopping environment and location in residential areas offers a unique opportunity to examine how young consumers, from teens to early twentiesⁱⁱ, use convenience stores. This is an exploratory piece of research with the aim of investigating young Tokyo consumer's use of convenience stores as part of their discretionary consumption practice. Part of this research attempts to look at the convenience store as an important, and distinct, 'shopping habitat' for young consumers. This includes looking at how young consumers use the 'konbini'; how they navigate the store; which areas they utilise in the store; what they do in store; how long they spend in the store and what they purchase? The research methods evolved in line with the investigation (Elms and Tinson 2012) and the paper centres on unobtrusive observation (Aitkin, 1978; Gram, 2015; Rust, 1993) in and around convenience stores at key times in the day to build a picture of how young consumers use these retail outlets. Data collection took place in the metropolitan area of Tokyo (Table 1) and Saitima in 2015. Observations were undertaken by undergraduate and postgraduate students as part of a class exercise and the observation sites were located in close proximity to student dormitories (Shiki area, located to the north of central Tokyo, in the Saitimaⁱⁱⁱ area.) and around educational establishments (cram schools and a university in Ikebukuro area^{iv} a central location in the North West of Tokyo, located on the JR Yamamoto rail line and close to one of the major retail locations around Ikebukuro station). All students were briefed on the observation exercise. Students were instructed to observe stores looking at store traffic in and out of the store, mobility and behaviour in the stores along with purchase behaviour of young consumers (estimated 8-14 years old). Further information was collected on store layout and merchandising. This observational data was supplemented accompanied shopping trips with 8 young consumers (aged between 18-22) in 2016 (Otnes et. al 1995). Interviews with parents and children were planned but due to problems with recruitment and translation this was replaced with a small survey of university and high school students using a convenience sample (n=47) based on student contacts and referrals from family and friends. All participants were 'regular' users of convenience store for food related purchases and familiar with these retail stores. One interview involved an accompanied shop with a young consumer (aged 14 years old) and her mother in 2016. All observations were unobtrusive and no individuals can be identified. Participants in the accompanied shopping trips were recruited via personal contacts and all agreed to participating in the exercise, anonymity was guaranteed and the

field notes make no reference to individuals. The observational data was analysed using field notes and discussions with student observers for patterns of movement in the store and reflections on the in store behaviours across different locations and times of observation. Descriptive accounts were used to identify consumption practices across the observed sites and several themes in the data. The questionnaire data was analysed using StatPlus:mac version 5 (AnalystSoft Inc., 2015).

Table1: Convenience stores data collection

Research method	<u>Time</u>	Data Collected
Store observations (May 2015)	<u>Morning</u> 7-11, Shiki, Saitima. 7.30-8.30 <u>Lunchtime</u> 7-11 Ikebukuro, 12.15-13.15 (3 separate occasions) <u>Afternoon/ evening</u> Family Mart, Ikebukuro 16.00-19.00 7-11 Ikebukuro 16.00-16.30	Observations, <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Focus on younger consumers (estimated age 8-14 years old). - Individuals and groups - Purchases - Estimated expenditure - Duration of visit - Store pathways
Student survey (May 2015)	Ikebukuro area, Tokyo.	N= 47 (convenience sample) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Frequency and time of CVS visit - Purchases - Average expenditure
Accompanied shop (May 2016)	Ikebukuro area,	N=10. 7males, 3 females. Observations and interviews <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Store selection - Type of purchase - In store 'journey' - Product interaction and choice - Information sources - Payment

Parent interview, accompanied shop (2016)	Tokyo	Accompanied store visit (7-11), <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - CVS usage interview - Purchases and expenditure - Buying motives
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Findings

Observations across different convenience stores and times revealed a distinct pattern of visits that included individuals and groups of shoppers, variation in purchases across the time of day, and practices that reflect the shopping environment. The analysis suggests a high degree of independent shopping and competent negotiation of the retail space.

Independent shopping as transitioning place

The first point of note is that this is a retail environment, the 'konbini', where parents are not present. In the 'konbini' young people are shopping on their own or with friends, negotiating the store, examining products, choosing products and brands, and making choices that have no direct influence from parents. They have complete discretion over what they buy, making independent decisions as they shop. In a small survey^v (n=47) the majority of university students (~68%) claimed to visit a convenience store two to four times per week. At the other extreme university students were more likely to visit twice a day compared to school aged children more of whom reported visiting once a week. The most popular visiting times are on the way to or after college/school (Kasamaki, 2013). The early morning observations in the Shiki area took place in a 7-Eleven located close to the railway station. This was a relatively busy store and its location close to the station made it an ideal stop off point en route to school. As it was early morning the students did not spend much time in the store buying small snack items, (onigiri, bread products and sweets) as well as drinks (juice, tea, canned coffee and water). In an interview with the mother of a 14 year old girl she explained how her daughter was not allowed to use convenience stores close to the school or at lunchtime, although she could visit a convenience store close to the station where she caught the train or use a small convenience store that was located in the school.

Around three quarters of the afternoon visits, involved young consumers on their own, unaccompanied by adults or friends. Entering the store most proceeded directly to those areas selling daily food, snacks and drinks; few loitered around the non-food areas. There

was a sense of purpose in their behaviour and they appeared to be familiar with the store layout and knew what products they wanted; evidenced by their going directly to specific areas of the store. Once at the fixtures they either selected the item without much deliberation or, depending on what was available on the shelves, picked up items and looked at the product and the price before selecting or returning the product.

A smaller number of observations centred on groups of young consumers. These were usually college or school groups and consisted for both single and mixed gender groups. The majority of these comprised all male or all female groups of two to five individuals who entered at the same time moving between different fixtures. Individuals would navigate different parts of the store to make specific purchases but come back to the group before moving to the checkout. Most of the groups were talking and chatting, the purchases were almost incidental, and like the individual shoppers they appeared to be familiar with the store layout moving directly to the daily food and snack areas to make their choices. However, there was interaction and discussion among friends about product choices, or suggestions about what to buy. For example, in one group of female shoppers, they entered the store and went directly to the snack section. As one of the females picked a snack her friends joked and laughed and the ensuing discussion led to the young woman changing her choice of snack. In other instances, suggestions and comments from peers were dismissed. Friends chatted as they went about their shopping but there was relatively little interaction with store staff and individuals appeared confident in making their purchases without assistance from staff. The groups tended to move around the store as a group buying what they wanted and standing in the queue together but paying individually. Consequently, the time in store was marginally longer for groups, 3-4 minutes compared to 1-2 minutes for those shopping alone. One of the lunchtime store observations showed proportionately more young females shopping in groups compared to young males. While there are few differences in the frequency of store visits between men and women (Miyakei, 2012) these observations suggest that males may be more impulsive and spend less time in the shop than females although in one case the males were more indecisive looking at several options before making their final choice.

In this self-service environment there was almost no interaction with sales staff until the point of sale; although staff regularly stock the shelves and call out the standard greeting 'irasshaimase' or welcome. The observations suggest that these are confident convenience store shoppers and the visits are part of their transition from home to school or college and back with the purpose of 'refuelling'. The question of what they are buying is reflected in the nature of the visit.

Convenient products and (un)healthy choices

There were some subtle differences in purchasing observed across the day. Onigiri was the most popular purchase in the early morning; drinks and snacks dominated at lunchtime with more snacks and meals bought towards the end of the day afterschool and before cram school. The observations in the afternoon and early evening, centred on 'konbini' located close to cram schools (juku) in Ikebukuro, and onigiri, salty snacks, sweets and drinks were most popular among the young shoppers (estimated 8-14 years old). The students typically bought two products comprising a drink and sweet, or onigiri and a salty snack, or two sweet products depending on the time of the day. This supports other research that found the purchase of snacks was higher in the afternoon period (Kasamaki, 2013) as children head for cram schools (Usui, 2014). This variation across the day partly reflects the shifting demands and stocking practices of the convenience stores who restock their stores at least three times per day at breakfast, lunch and dinnertime, adapting the product offering accordingly. Stores collect data on what is selling and use this information in their decisions about what to stock and which products to retain or change (Lawson and Causton 2005, Ishikawa and Nejo 1998).

Despite the wide range of food items in store most of the observed purchases centred on onigiri (rice balls), snacks and confectionary. Onigiri could be considered a relatively healthy choice and on the basis of the observations and survey the most popular drink is green tea. In store observations at peak times of the day revealed the most popular items. Low stocks of onigiri and popular snacks, such as branded chocolate covered bread sticks, gave an indication of what was popular. The observations across the day showed onigiri to be universally popular as a snack.

Individuals paid for their own daily foods and snacks. Average expenditure was between 100-350 yen, depending on the time of the day and involved single items such as drinks or a drink and food, or several items of food. This is below the average expenditure in a convenience store and does not represent a high sale per customer. These consumers may be restricted by their budget or their expenditure may simply reflect the types of products they are buying but the limited expenditure means the quantity of less healthy options is further restricted. In the survey three quarters of the university students were spending between 200-600 yen with younger consumers more likely to spend up to 200 yen on each visit. All of the products are chosen before they arrive at the cash point and the majority of transactions are paid for in cash. In the accompanied shopping with students several paid with suica^{vi} or store cards. Options to have products heated are available at the till point but the majority of products sold were not reheated for immediate use.

Planned impulse – from product to brand choice

Once the decision is made to enter the store then a purchase, however large or small, is likely and with a variety of new products and private label there is always something new on offer. The final choice often depended on what was on the shelf during the visit and decisions in store are influenced by the item availability. Where products were out of stock, for example in the busy afternoon period when there is greater demand for snacks, individuals either looked for alternatives or left the store. Despite the fact that there are usually other 'konbini' within a short walking distance in most of the cases individuals made a purchase rather than leaving the store empty handed.

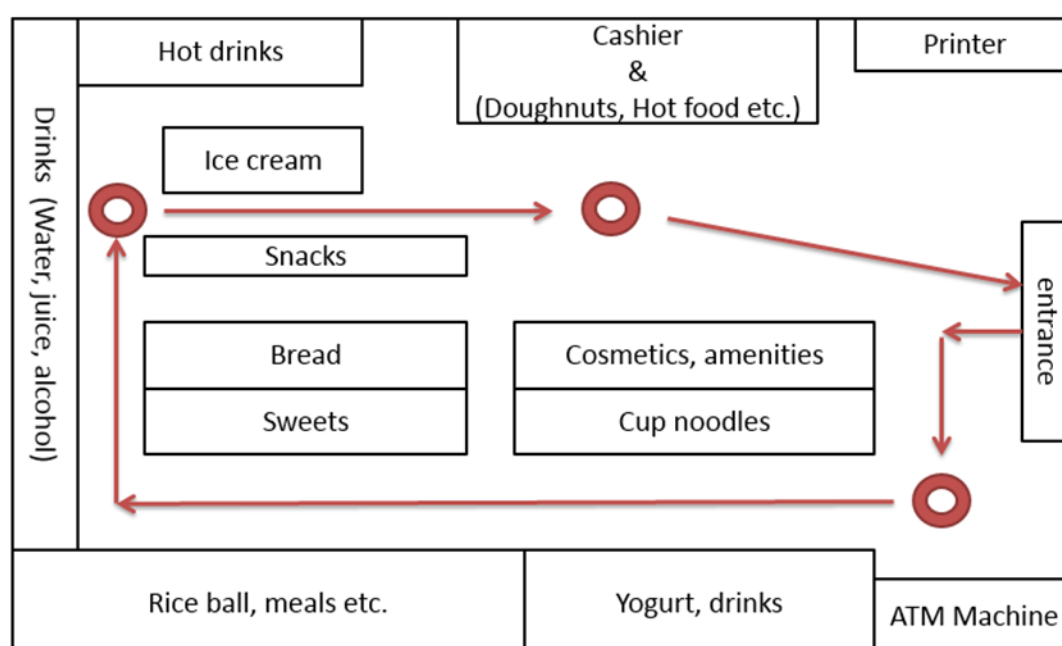
A number of products were out of stock at the time of the visit and many of these items appeared to be on promotion (as indicated by shelf labelling). In-store promotions may be directly influencing customer's decisions on what to buy in store, particularly given the average expenditure per visit, as these young consumers are attracted to products on offer that fit with their budgets. It is unclear from the observations whether customers are buying what they intended to buy before entering the store, or reacting to an in store promotion or an out of stock situation and purchasing a close alternative. Either way the final decision about what to buy may be taken in store in response to what is available, to in store promotions, or after consulting with others in the group.

The situation is exacerbated by the regular appearance of new items in the store. In the case of Seven-Eleven this can be up to 100 new products a week in a store with around 2800 stock keeping units (SKU's). A number of young consumers look at the package or compare products – particularly where the products were new or on trial. There are regular promotions in the convenience stores, for example, at the time of observations Seven-Eleven were promoting a new sweet breaded snack product and coffee and donuts at the checkout counter. Many of these new products were promoted in store, and while it is difficult to ascertain the influence of these promotional activities on final purchase young consumers were clearly exposed too this information (Sanders-Jackson 2015, Fairley et al 2009, Sharkey et. al. 2012).

Price promotions and special offers do appear to influence the final decision, as one of the accompanied shopping trips with a young 22 years old male full time university student revealed. This visit took place at 13.15 just after lunch on his way to the library. The individual chose the store which was most convenient, ignoring a competitor store located on the other side of the street. On entering the store he went straight to the ATM, located immediately inside the store by the entrance, (Figure 1), to withdraw some money. It was hot day, 27 degrees Celsius, and in the store he decided to purchase a drink. He explained that

he had opted for water rather than coffee or tea because of the hot weather and he wanted something to drink in the library. On arriving at the drinks section, he went directly to the section at the back of the store as he knew the store and used it regularly. He immediately picked up the Suntory branded water, which he claimed to be loyal to, but then changed his mind and selected the cheaper private label returning the Suntory brand to the shelf. The final decision to choose the private label was based on price.

Figure 1: Convenience store layout (Ikebukuro) and student shopping path^{vii}.



As this accompanied shop illustrates there was some more deliberation in-store over which brand (rather than product) to choose. In the case of the 'konbini' a high proportion of the products are private label brands including value, premium and high end store brands. Entering a Seven-Eleven, or Family Mart or Lawson 'konbini' means that individuals are likely to be exposed to a high proportion of private label products and this is where much of the in store promotion is focused. While manufacturer brands are available these tend to be more expensive and the private label offers a reasonable priced alternative that appeals to the young shopper, as the accompanied shopping trips revealed. There was an overall preference (~60%) for manufacturer brands over private label with university students more likely to choose private label. In another accompanied shop a young man, aged 22, purchased a popular manufacturer brand of chocolate bar on his way home from evening class in order to stave his hunger. As he knew in advance what he was planning to purchase the selection of store was less important.

While convenience stores differ in their layouts the product range or products is similar within individual stores and across chains. Consequently, these stores are ideal for young consumers as they are easy to navigate and stock products that they are familiar with such as drinks, daily foods, snacks and confectionary. Although regarded as more expensive than supermarkets their appeal may reside in the location, size of the store, ease of negotiation and the expediency and anonymity of the in-store experience. The stores are 'busy' and faced with a number of products in a relatively small space these young consumers are able to negotiate their way round the shelves and the marketing and promotional literature. These are inexpensive low involvement purchases driven as much by habit and seen as a 'necessary' treat.

Discussion

This is a limited study confined to a small number of stores and drawing on observations, accompanied shopping trips and a convenience survey of young consumers. Observation does not allow us to discover the nature of the decision and tracking individual purchases behaviours is challenging in a crowded convenience store environment. However, the student survey and accompanied shopping provided some insights into how young consumers use convenience stores. It shows them visiting convenience stores alone and in groups buying a range of food products across the day and responding to what is available in store and to the influence of friends. 'Konbini' remain an important part of young consumers' food retail experience and a place where they can exercise some discretionary consumption (Marshall et. al. 2007, Moschis and Moore 1979, Usui 2014).

The expansion of this sector is likely to result in even greater exposure to these types of food retail outlet (Japan Consuming 2016). Although the proliferation of stores means that there are usually several options to choose from in any location raising questions about what drives store preference (Filipovic and Djordjevic 2010, Williams and Burns 2001). The observed visits appear purposeful and expedient, with relatively little time being spent in or around the convenience store, but also impulsive and spontaneous (Olshavsky and Granbois, 1979, Rook and Hoch 1985). Across several stores and locations the overwhelming observation was the limited time spent in the convenience store. Interaction between friends can lead to changing preferences as can the availability of in store promotions. Convenience stores appear to be an integral part of the shopping experience for young consumers who are using the stores in and around their study activities travelling to or from school, to cram school, or university lectures. As one interview and accompanied shop with a young student and her mother revealed this can be seen as an opportunity to give younger consumers some responsibility and independence in their food purchasing.

Providing a weekly allowance permits discretionary consumption but those choices, on a budget, may result in more snacks and soft drinks being consumed on those occasions when the convenience store visit replaces the bento lunchbox from home. The product assortment, placement and promotion, as Sharkey et. al. (2012) note, exposes young consumers to a range of products that include less healthy items. Yet Japanese 'konbini' sell products such as rice balls, freshly prepared and chilled foods that challenge this perception of the convenience store. The demand for constant innovation and high quality products along with the recent interest in fresh products is changing the perception of the convenience store more generally. The popularity of bread products compared to the traditional onigiri raises some interesting questions about the ways in which product development; merchandising and promotional policies in individual outlets expose young consumers to a more, or less, healthy range of options. At present most stores sell proportionally more daily food than processed food. The interest in, and shift towards, more fresh foods is a positive development in this sector but whether younger consumers will buy these products is another question. At present bento, bread products and savoury snacks are oriented towards those aged 30 and above^{viii}. Given that expenditure per visit was around 300 yen this limits what these young consumers are spending and their ability to trade up to fresh foods or meals. Moreover, many of the purchases appear to supplement or replace lunches or tie individuals over to the evening family meal; which remains an important part of Japanese family life (Agriculture and Agrifood Canada, 2010). There was little evidence of young consumers eating in store and public consumption of snack foods is not widely evident in and around the stores. For example, we did not see young people spending any time hanging about in store^{ix} (which is different in other cultures where the convenience store is seen as a place to hang out (Hota et. al., 2014)).

What we see is a set of consumption practices that reveal the extent to which children are engaging in and using these retail stores to purchase foods for their own use in and around school or college activities. The relatively long school days supplemented by additional study in cram schools necessitates some form of sustenance but the observations do not suggest an over reliance on sweet foods or snacks. The choice of store appears to be as much about location as it is about the merchandise. While children appear to be enjoying themselves with their friends many of the products could not be described as fun food. In this respect we would suggest that fun stores are not a necessary condition to sell fun foods (Barrey et. al., 2010). In many ways convenience stores are more relevant for this group of young consumers – they have limited time to shop, want something that is ready to eat, and in a store that is both easy to navigate and find foods, while tempting them with an array of new products. These physical stores provide the opportunity for some discretion where young

consumers can examine and select products they want (Boulay et. al. 2014). This is different from the regular food shopping experience of the supermarket (Haddock-Fraser et. al 2009) and the appeal 'fun' may actually lie in the independence it affords them in making choices for themselves.

In these observations young consumers appear to use the convenience store as an expedient way to access food and in a way that may be very different from using a supermarket – the purchases are small, there is not much evidence of browsing, and little interaction with other customers. At the same time the convenience store is heavily branded especially in private label, has in store promotions and a product range that changes across the time of day and week by week. Unlike the independent store (Everts and Jackson 2009) convenience stores with their self-service, fast checkout and young staff offer a degree of anonymity that seems to appeal to younger consumers who are using the convenience store in a very distinct way. We do not know what other outlets these consumers are using but the presence of vending machines everywhere in Tokyo makes drinks water, green tea, coffee etc. very accessible. In the case of snacks the proliferation of coffee bars and fast food outlets offer other opportunities for different types of food but the ubiquity of the convenience store means there is literally not one but usually several on every street.

The unavoidable exposure to these retail formats means that what the stores elect to stock can potentially have a huge influence on what children are buying and eating. Concerns elsewhere about children's exposure to the food environment (Wills et. al., 2015, Sanders-Jackson 2015, Sharkey 2012, Fairley et al 200) is particularly relevant here and has implications for the health of young Japanese consumers (but see Murakami 2009, 2010). Habits and practices established in these early years may set a precedent for food consumption patterns and behaviour in later years. Engaging the convenience sector in promoting healthy options may be one way to impact on the diet of young consumers in and around school activities. It is clear that young consumers are buying a range of products including onigiri and healthier drinks and not simply purchasing processed foods and snack products, although they do constitute a large part of the purchases. Convenience store companies track and record the age and gender of shoppers so have a clear idea what is selling item by item. They clearly know their customers and what they want. It would be interesting to see this data and what young consumers are buying.

What this research suggests is a relatively high level of discretionary consumption among young Japanese consumers. These children are not hanging around the convenience store, they don't have time, but they are using these outlets on a regular basis and appear to be

very familiar with the store layout. In this sense the convenience store is part of their transition between places (home, school, college) and into the practice of food shopping.

Conclusion

The aim of this exploratory research was to look at young Tokyo consumer's use of convenience stores as part of their discretionary consumption practice. What the observations reveal is that young consumers are using convenience stores as a 'shopping habitat' to purchase food and drink and their decisions on what to buy reflect temporal, social and promotional activities. Future research might look at what a representative sample of young consumers are purchasing or work with the convenience store operators to explore distinct purchasing patterns for young consumers. Extending the research to include other food shopping outlets and suburban, or outlying areas, would add to our understanding of how young consumers engage with the food environment. The next stage of this research will involve a larger survey of young consumers and consider their evaluation of 'konbini' relative to other types of food retail outlet. The buying behaviour we observed does not suggest that this is anything more than a response to a practical problem of feeding but at the same time it allows young consumers to exercise some choice – deciding to spend their money on a lunchbox (bento) or using it to buy onigiri and then treating themselves to a snack. Further qualitative studies utilising focus groups or individual interviews and more accompanied shopping would contribute to the present research. The ubiquity of the convenience store means that everyone has access but there is a risk that in focusing on emerging segments that the convenience sector is missing an opportunity to continue to attract some of its traditional customer base while appealing to growing demands for healthy food that is good tasting and nutritious. It would be interesting to measure the response of young consumers to these developments in the convenience sector and how these align with their requirements as consumers.

In terms of discretionary consumption these young consumers are making choices independent of direct parental influence. We have no idea to what extent these choices are mandated indirectly by parents but the children are free, within their available budget, to buy what they want. Some of their decisions appear to be driven by curiosity around new products, or by promotional offers, as evidenced by the out of stock displays. This early exposure to 'independent' shopping provides an opportunity for them to learn how to navigate the in store environment, respond to offers and balance this with other decisions about what they have to purchase. Young consumers are aware of the marketing influences on their decisions outside and inside the store, as the accompanied shopping trips show, but purchases are as likely to include healthy, as unhealthy food and drinks. As the number of

convenience stores grows merchandising and stocking decisions will have a direct influence on food availability and choice (Lake et. al., 2011; Wills, 2015, Sanders-Jackson 2015). It will be interesting to see how the shift in merchandising towards healthier products and bento meals, driven by the aging demographic, will impact on the shopping behaviour of younger Japanese consumers (Kodera, 2015) or whether these are simply not relevant to this segment of the Japanese 'konbini'. Providing a range of healthier options opens up the possibility of changing behaviour in a more healthful way.

While the current focus in the convenience sector is on the demographic changes and the challenges faced by an ageing population there is a question over how young consumer's experiences at this stage are likely to shape their food choice practices later in life.

Interestingly, it is the growing population of older consumers who can remember when small stores sold fresh produce (Usui 2014). For many young consumers, the 'konbini' provides an important 'shopping habitat' where they can exercise some discretion over what they eat. Irrespective of what they choose convenience stores are likely to remain an integral part of their food consumption experiences. In many ways these are retail spaces where children are transitioning as food consumers and it provides an important opportunity to begin to shape the choices of a future generation in a way that is beneficial to both the retailers and the young consumers.

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ⁱ The *supers*, looking for growth, were attracted by formats that eluded the Large-scale Retail Laws which restricted opening hours and regulated the floor space of large scale retail store formats (Usui 2014: 184)

ⁱⁱⁱ The initial research focus was on pre-university students 12-18 years old but there were a number of challenges with recruitment so the research focus shifted towards university students, 18-22 years old. Young consumers covers the 12-22 age group. The key characteristic is that they are shopping unaccompanied by parents or guardians.

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- iii Shiki is located in the Saitama Prefecture, situated to the north west of Tokyo .
<https://www.google.co.uk/maps/place/Shiki,+Saitama+Prefecture,+Japan/@35.8397188,139.5639944,14z/data=!3m1!4b1!4m5!3m4!1s0x6018c271b55669fb:0x107d104cebb1ef27!8m2!3d35.8367501!4d139.5803194>
- iv Ikebukuro is a commercial and entertainment district in Toshima, Tokyo, Japan. Toshima ward offices, Ikebukuro station, and several shops, restaurants, and enormous department stores are located within city limits. <https://www.google.co.uk/maps/place/Ikebukuro,+Toshima,+Tokyo+170-0014,+Japan/@35.7378164,139.6903217,14z/data=!4m5!3m4!1s0x601892a0a5585c27:0xb420ac39f1dc62ba!8m2!3d35.7377967!4d139.7074498>
- v The majority of young consumers completing the survey (n=47) were first year university students, so relatively recent graduates from school and familiar with using convenience stores (university students 82.2%, elementary school students 4.4%, Junior High and High school 13.3%).
- vi The Suica card is a pre-paid cash card and used to purchase rail tickets or used in convenience stores for small purchases.
- vii Thanks to Keisuke Nishimaki for producing this Figure 1.
- viii Personal communication with Marketing Manager at leading bakery company supplying convenience stores and supermarkets 07/05.2016.
- ix One of the students on the accompanied shop talked about finding somewhere to eat what she had purchased and felt that Japanese convenience stores might offer this as an option. She referred to her experiences at another store, Famina at Tsutaya Kaden located in a suburb of Tokyo where one could relax <http://ryutsuu.biz/topix/h050117.html>